

DAVID BARLOW

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It is always sad when a composer dies young since his latent potential will never be realised; had Mozart lived another forty years, as well he might have done, what might he have achieved in addition to the extant monumental masterpieces? Furthermore, if in a short life-span a composer has not been recognised, he needs a champion to bring his music into the public realm. Sadly, champions of the recently dead are rare indeed

Or is it that Barlow's music does not warrant any attention or respect?

"David Barlow was not only a highly respected composer but a much-loved teacher in the Department of Music," wrote David Greer, one time Professor of Music at Newcastle University. Another colleague, Percy Lovell, who was educated at King's College, Cambridge and studied with Boris Ord and Hubert Middleton before spending twenty-one years as director of music at Bootham's School, York and then eighteen years at Newcastle University, writes, "As a teacher, David Barlow's unfailing zest for music was very much in evidence – his enthusiasms ranged from Dunstable to the mid-twentieth century... his encyclopaedic knowledge of scores of all periods and his ability to bring them to life at the piano was almost legendary. A man of candour and immediacy, he expressed himself forcefully both about music and people and glowed with delight at each fresh discovery in the one and each new contact in the other field. In many ways, he was a law unto himself - a true character."

Barlow was born at Rothwell, Northamptonshire on 20 May 1927. His father, Lance, was the owner of a small agricultural implement factory. His mother, Elsie, née Butlin, sang in a Methodist church choir and undertook the duties of organist at that church during World War II. A cousin, Fred Barlow, supervised a children's choir so David grew up with some music. In fact he showed remarkable musical talent as a child; on 31 March 1940, after attending a symphony concert in Leicester, the now distinguished keyboard player, Kenneth Mobbs, two years his senior, went back to the Barlow home and was astounded to hear the twelve-year-old play Sibelius's Finlandia complete at the piano, having learnt it solely from a gramophone recording.

It is believed that Fred Barlow may have been David's first piano tutor; thereafter he had lessons on the very heavy tracker organ at Rothwell Methodist Church. In the early 1940s he went for lessons to Cyril Butlin, a respected music teacher in Kettering.

His talent for composition was quickly evident, encouraged, no doubt, by hearing the full symphony orchestra and Walton's magnificent Symphony No. 1. Around 1942 Barlow exchanged correspondence with Walton who sent him complimentary copies of his Music for Children. At this time David was improvising at the piano in a simple Elgarian style – he loved sequences. His interests were exclusively bound up with music and he could not live without it. He was influenced by Elgar, Walton, Moeran, Bax and Delius as well as Respighi, Bruckner and Mahler, although these latter composers were little known in England at that time. Probably Barlow's first performed work was a set of variations for two pianos played by Kenneth Mobbs and the composer shortly after the war. For three years from 1943 his music teacher was Rev. Greville Cooke, vicar of Cransley, near Kettering, who also taught at the Royal Academy of Music. As to his schooling David Barlow used to say that he held the record for the longest attendance at Kettering Grammar School, having joined the kindergarten department in 1934 when he was seven years old and leaving in 1946 when he was nineteen. Apparently the masters were sad that he was not to celebrate his twenty-first birthday there! He was an intelligent pupil but did not bother with subjects that did not interest him. Sport was anathema and he always seemed to be excused by way of the medical certificates that he produced. There was no music at school save for the morning hymn and a march for the boys to leave by. David and Kenneth shared the playing for morning assemblies.

In 1946 Barlow went to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, eventually achieving an MA degree in music. Here in post-war Cambridge he was influenced by older musicians such as Patrick Hadley, Hubert Middleton and Boris Ord as well as the new breed of music scholars led by Thurston Dart. He then had a year at the Royal College of Music studying composition and orchestration with Gordon Jacob and winning the Cobbett

Chamber Music Prize with a String Trio: Phantasy in E Minor in 1950. He also studied the piano with Dr. Thomas Fielding. After RCM he had a year based at home in Rothwell engaging in some extra-mural lecturing and obtaining his B.Mus. having, for his practical examination, to play the Brahms Handel Variations.

In 1951 he was appointed lecturer in music at King's College (now the university) Newcastle-upon-Tyne, becoming senior lecturer in 1968, the year in which he was instrumental in bringing Nadia Boulanger to Newcastle to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Music. Barlow was greatly influenced by Boulanger in his final decade, often attending her annual summer schools in Fontainebleau which largely attracted Americans. Several works were composed or begun here, such as *My Heart is Smitten* (1964) and *November 1951* (1967).

Barlow's first professional performance was his catchy Open Air Piece conducted by Alexander Gibson with the RCM Student Orchestra in 1950. The *Symphony No.1* in E minor, which also dates from 1950, is in one continuous movement which begins with a slow introduction leading into an *Allegro energico* which is mainly concerned with the development of the material heard in the Introduction. A second group of themes follow which are in pastoral mood, and which the composer said are linked with his home county. A contrasting section in the style of a scherzo follows and this leads to an elaborate recapitulation of the material heard earlier. This work was Barlow's first broadcast piece, given by the BBC Northern Orchestra under John Hopkins in 1956. The work contains a few moments of choice beauty but often the music is aurally dreamy or lazy; the symphony to my mind is not totally convincing. Conversely the *Symphony No.2* which dates from the years 1956 to 1959 is a stronger and far more impressive work. It won first prize in the Northern Composers' Guild Competition and was first performed by the BBC Northern Orchestra under Moshe Atzmon in Liverpool in 1969. The delay of a performance was due to the BBC's being loath to broadcast it as it was a work that they had already turned down. In the composer's words, "The Symphony is in two movements. In the first, a quiet spacious *Adagio* of telling quality leads to the *Allegro* which alternates between ebullient energy and intense lyricism. Towards the end of the movement, after an extended melodic passage for violins in their highest register, tension mounts until all energy is dissipated in a series of violent eruptions followed by a varied reprise of the haunting introduction. The second movement is a set of variations on a theme related to ideas expressed in the first movement. The variations which maintain the sequential nature of the theme go through all the keys and culminate in a clashing statement of the main themes of both movements, eventually resolving to C sharp, the underlying tonality of the whole work."

The *Pastorale* and *Variations* for small orchestra dates from 1960 and was described by the composer as 'a set of seven miniatures all deriving freely from the opening pastorale which typifies for me autumn in the north east.' As with the *Symphony No.2*, elements of melancholy sighing and personal loneliness appear in this often beautiful score, possibly reflecting the composer's growing awareness of the isolation of his vocation, aggravated by his non-acceptance as a musical voice to be reckoned with.

David Barlow married Gillian Radcliffe at St. George's Church, Jesmond, in March 1961. Gilly, as she was known, is a violinist, having received scholarships at the Royal College of Music, winning the W. H. Reed prize, and the Brussels Conservatoire. She played in the Northern Sinfonia, the orchestra based in Newcastle. Sadly, the marriage did not last; they separated at the end of 1969 and the divorce became absolute in 1972. The reasons may be that Barlow worked hard, perhaps too hard; sometimes he would compose all day. Although he was not a smoker he did drink unwisely and this problem increased after the break-up of the marriage. He had tremendous self-doubts and badly needed to be appreciated and recognised. The neglect of his music and the prospects of his death troubled him immensely. His constant problem with high blood pressure precluded a family. Although his mood was both basically cheerful, despite his lugubrious speech, and also enormously enthusiastic, it alternated with severe depression which worsened in later years. While his intentions were always to be courteous he was often boorish due, no doubt, to his condition. His loneliness was not helped by his hobby of solitary walking; he sought solace in alcohol, in female company which he craved, and in pantheism. He took a great interest in the lives of English martyrs; he was interested in the beliefs of the Christian Scientist organisation but it was in conflict with his inability to forgo his pills for his blood pressure. He is known to have attended Quaker meetings. Bible stories had a fascination for him, particularly erotic ones. His church opera *David and Bathsheba*, with a libretto by Ursula Vaughan Williams,

a work of powerful musical imagery, was first performed in St. Thomas's Church for the Newcastle Festival on 15 October 1969 when Barlow was its "composer of the year". The Ulster Orchestra, with soloists including Hazel Holt, Michael Rippon and Philip Langridge was conducted by Janos Furst. Other "Biblical" works are Judas, an oratorio in four scenes with a prelude; Susanna and the Elders; Portrait of Deborah, a Sinfonia Concertante for violin and small orchestra; Three Settings from the Song of Solomon; Genesis for piano and other religious works for chorus. His other literary interests included Wordsworth, the Brontes, Tennyson, John Clare and the mysticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins which was closely reflected in his own psyche. His ex-wife described him as a man of the people, and of a left-wing persuasion, although he was never active in politics. Music remained his one and only consuming passion. Each of his compositions is remarkable for a consistency of style throughout, a quality missing in the works of some composers.

In the 1960s Barlow produced some interesting scores. The Five Preludes after the Tempest date from 1965 and were written for the Northern Sinfonia at the invitation of the Hexham Abbey Festival. Their moods were suggested by lines or situations from Shakespeare's plays. The first prelude, "Malediction", suggests Caliban's hatred of Prospero; the second, "Sea Change", is full of typical Barlow melancholy sighs; the third, "Invocation", has violent interruptions; the fourth, "Ariel", is a tenuous scherzo and the fifth, untitled, quotes as a motto Prospero's lines "We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep". This is a work of supreme imagination. Homage to John Clare, and the scena November 1951 for soprano and orchestra, are both closely affected by the scenery of the East Midlands. Homage to John Clare was inspired by words penned by the poet in a Northampton lunatic asylum - "All dark and absent like a corpse's eye" (referring to an autumn night); and by contrast, "Where the pheasant's red eye for a moment was caught, then vanished away like a humming bee's song". The first quote is portrayed musically as sombre and atmospheric; the second quote has two textures, one slow and mournful, the other light and rhythmic. The orchestral writing is superb; the score is highly evocative and the effect spiritually satisfying. The work has a tremendous warmth with woodwind figurations suggesting shafts of autumnal sunshine; the wonderfully translucent textures are superlative. November 1951 blends the soprano with judicious orchestral writing. This is deeply-felt music of the soul, rich with opulent sounds; this fecund work should be taken up by discerning singers. These two impressive works are sometimes tonal, occasionally modal, but also reflect the result of his musical reassessment which occurred about 1962 when Barlow closely studied the works of Webern. David Barlow had made friends with the blind composer, Paul Crunden-White, who had come to live and teach in Rothwell. He was a student of Priaulx Rainier. Rainier had studied with Nadia Boulanger, and Barlow caught some enthusiasm for Rainier's work and her interest in the dodecaphonic style, particularly her work Quanta for oboe and string trio (1962) which clearly influenced his own work, some of which employed the oboe. Barlow's compositions were now in a more intense, compact style which used modified serial-methods as in the Oboe Quartet of 1963, the Theme and Variations for string trio of 1965, and the superb Five Preludes after the Tempest. Bearing in mind his catholic taste and previous dedication to the English Pastoral School this reversal of thought is remarkable. In earlier years he listened to music by Humphrey Searle in the dark, shining a torch into his face which he deliberately contorted to amuse his friends. In his maturity he admired the "brilliance of the unsurpassed originality" of Searle's music. He retained his love for Bach (he used to play recordings conducted by Karl Richter at an unreasonable volume level); he adored Mozart and Beethoven; loved the opulence of Debussy; the deftness of the songs of Duparc and, in a different style altogether, valued the Brahms symphonies and had an "uncontrollable enthusiasm for Wagner". He went through a highly excited phase in studying The Ring. As for English music he liked Elgar; was particularly keen on Britten, especially Peter Grimes and the War Requiem, yet he admitted that Tippett was a far greater composer. His fondness for women, as indicated in the subject matter of some of his works coupled with his habits and his fascination with Rainier and Boulanger, led him to express lavish praise about their musicality when it was sometimes unmerited. Like John Clare, he was a troubled soul wanting desperately to be loved and accepted; full of self-doubts and painful inner conflicts.

He was, however, a fine musician. As a lecturer he was superb and did not need copious notes; he dealt with the history of music, covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, harmony, scoring and keyboard skills. Talented and committed students, such as Robert Sherlaw-Johnson and Anthony Payne, found him excellent; those less gifted probably saw him in a different light.

Those who worked with Barlow could not fail to be caught up in his world of fantastic enthusiasm. In turn they include Michael Hall, Rudolf Schwarz and David Haslam with the Northern Sinfonia; Moshe Atzmon with the splendid Symphony No.2; the unrivalled Aeolian Quartet with the sombre brooding String Quartet No.2 and the mellow Quintet; Joan Dickson for the Variations for cello and strings and the John Alldis choir in the premiere of the Ave Maria in 1965, and various singers who enjoyed his exceptionally fine songs.

David Barlow died on 9 June 1975 from a massive stroke which seems to have occurred while he was asleep. He was found in bed by his landlady and there never was any doubt about the diagnosis. His final years were very difficult health wise although he used to joke about his medication. In order to control the blood pressure he had to take a large quantity of pills daily and control the dosage precisely. Barlow often referred to his 'suicide pills' in a convivial manner to cover up the surging anxiety within him.

Percy Lovell calls him a composer of "innate compassion, sensitivity and romanticism". He may not be a great composer but his best works are superior to many works of other composers which are readily available on commercial recordings. Yet he seems to be another casualty of an unjust musical environment, and this injustice, as with others, should be rectified in the best interests of musical equity.

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